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# Student Perceptions of Aging and Disability as Influenced by Service Learning

David Greene, PhD, MS, OTR

**ABSTRACT.** This study examined the effects of two community service learning experiences on student perceptions of aging in a nursing home and on community-based living with a disability. According to content analysis of student narratives, service learning resulted in increased student awareness of issues pertinent to the students' companions in both settings. This heightened awareness was discussed in terms of the capacity for empathy. While both experiences were effective, there were differences in student responses to the two service learning settings. This suggests a uniqueness in benefit from different settings for service learning. Instructors should design community placements accordingly being cognizant of the desired educational goals. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworthpressinc.com](mailto:getinfo@haworthpressinc.com)]*

**KEYWORDS.** Older adults, service learning, disabilities, empathy

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a need for occupational therapy educators to attend closely to the development of empathic tendencies in students. There should be no assumptions that empathy is a natural tendency in a profession modeled so

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closely after Western medicine. Peloquin (1995) described pairings such as reasoning and feeling, and rational and emotional as mutually exclusive when viewed from the more one-sided, rational emphasis of Western thought. She spoke of the perpetuation of this thinking as leading to an "impoverishment of empathy" (p. 25).

Fleming (1991), following the clinical reasoning process among occupational therapists, discussed the importance of interactive reasoning in its ability to move beyond the factual and into the implicit to better understand one's disability from his or her view. This more empathic perspective is consistent with the identification of *dignity* as one of the "seven basic concepts [around which] the core values and attitudes of occupational therapy are organized" (p. 1085, AOTA, 1993).

Adler (1931), on attending to clients more fully, described the importance of the therapist's larger-than-self view in which individuals are seen in a broader perspective of how one may influence society and vice versa. This view conforms to the characterization of higher levels of moral reasoning involving a global, contextual perspective where one both impacts and is impacted by the environment. Again, empathy is implicit as at this point in moral development one knows the importance of mutuality of concern in interpersonal relationships (Gibbs, Basinger, & Fuller, 1992) and displays, among other things, true empathy.

Service learning is presented here as a form of experiential education that promotes the development of empathy. This is orchestrated through involvement of students in community service activities linked to specific learning goals. Activities are chosen to provide opportunities for inductive learning, building theory out of experience. Service learning involves serving another and allows the student to experience encounters through which he or she can become educated about the daily life issues of another as impacted by culture and social policy. The student and the individual who is served are not simply passive recipients of education and some charitable act respectively, but are co-participants in an enhanced, multifaceted servo-educational experience. Learning occurs in a combination of settings including the site of the service, the classroom, and the reflective, interactive student journal. In the words of Honnet and Paulen (1989), "Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" (p. 1).

The writings of John Dewey (1900, 1910, 1938) highlighted the developmental nature of learning through experience. The development of thought itself was related to the need for experience (versus teaching via verbal presentation): "General appeals to a child (or to a grown-up) to think, irrespective of the existence in his own experience of some difficul-

ty that troubles him and disturbs his equilibrium, are as futile as advice to lift himself by his boot-straps" (Dewey, 1910, p. 12). Furthermore, according to Dewey, thoughtful reflection on experience should be facilitated leading one to come to his or her own conclusions. Dewey said, "Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance" (Dewey, 1910, p. 13).

In recent years, numerous studies have confirmed the positive effect of service-learning both on students and service recipients. Lyons (1985) identified an overall benefit to older adults who volunteered to be interviewed by school-aged children in an intergenerational program. Older adult responses included satisfaction in having an opportunity to contribute to the growth of the next generation. Increased opportunities for contact with people outside of the nursing home environment have been associated with positive evaluations (Newman, Lyons, & Onawola, 1985), increase in sense of well-being (Hook, Sobal, & Oak, 1982) and morale (Arthur, Donnan, & Lair, 1973). Bringle and Kremer (1993) were able to observe such positive outcomes with older adults in only eight weeks of service-learning consisting of visitation and interviews by college students.

Studies also have documented outcomes of service-learning regarding students in the server role. Greene and Diehn (1995) demonstrated both students and their older adult companions found educational value in the weekly visitation and taking of oral histories by the students. The students also reported a diminishing of previously held stereotypes about aging and older adults. McGowan and Blankenship (1994) found similar effects in their intergenerational project reporting their students identified discrepancies between previously held assumptions about older adults and what the students observed in their companions. Others have discussed increased student enthusiasm for working with older adults subsequent to service-learning involving medical care by student professionals in community-based sites (Boren, Johnson, & Pawlson, 1982). Students involved in service-learning also have been shown to demonstrate increased awareness of multidimensionality and prosocial reasoning in responses to statements of social problems (Batchelder & Root, 1994).

It was the purpose of this project to determine the effect of two separate service-learning experiences on students' awareness of issues affecting aging residents of nursing homes and individuals with disabilities. The general question was whether involving students in real community service experiences linked with educational goals and activities would lead to

increased awareness and sensitivity laying the ground work for the better understanding necessary for empathic practice in occupational therapy. Additionally, this study seized the opportunity to compare two different settings and companion groups to determine whether these settings offered different benefits based on their different contexts.

## METHOD

### *Study Participants*

This study employed a convenience sample of junior occupational therapy students enrolled in two occupational therapy programs. The two programs were geographically separate but were accredited under one department and followed one curriculum design. All students were in their first year of the professional baccalaureate program and had not yet begun Level I fieldwork. Students of one intervention condition ( $n = 19$ ) performed service learning with older adult nursing home resident, had an average age of 24.8 years, and were 89.5 percent female. The second intervention condition ( $n = 33$ ) performed service learning with individuals with disabilities in community settings, had an average age of 25.8 years, and was 87.9 percent female. The students were not randomly assigned to groups but appeared in the two groups based on enrollment in the same class on two different campuses.

### *General Procedures*

Students participated in this study as part of the requirement for completing the course. Volunteers (nursing home residents and adults with disabilities) who were interested in participating were paired with students of the two groups. During the week following the first visit with their companions, students in the two groups were asked to write down their thoughts on aging or disability using one page or less in response to the statement: "Discuss your perspective on aging" or "Discuss your perspective on living with a disability." The timing of this assignment was intended to allow an introductory influence from the settings for service learning but not the anticipated full effect of more prolonged engagement. These were considered "pretest" narratives.

Students participated in six visits (one per week), according to their group assignment, with residents (ages 65-85) at one of two area nursing homes or individuals with disabilities (ages 18-50) who were living in

their homes at the time of the study. In both cases, the visit lasted approximately one hour and the student visited with the same individual each week. All interactions between students and companions centered around an activity in which students interviewed subjects to obtain oral histories (Baum, 1980; Allen, 1987). Each week the student wrote and turned in a journal entry in which reflections on the visit were documented. Journal entries were read and responded to (in writing) within two days by the instructor. These journals were intended to intensify the experience but entries were not analyzed as data for the study.

At the conclusion of the six weeks, in the week following the last visit, students once again responded in writing to the two original requests on perspectives on aging or disability using the same space guidelines as in the pretest. These second narratives were considered the posttest narratives.

### ***Data Analysis***

Pre- and posttest narrative responses to the questions "Discuss your perspective on aging" or "Discuss your perspective on living with a disability" were read and the students writings were examined using content analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Specific references for which there was commonality (Tables 1 and 2) comparing pre- to posttest narratives were tallied and categorized in order to assess the change in perspectives among students over time with respect to frequency of mention of these terms. Additionally, posttest narratives were compared between groups in the interest of identifying differences in the effects of the two service learning settings.

## ***RESULTS***

### ***Student Perspectives on Aging Before and After Service Learning with Nursing Home Residents***

A major delineation was apparent comparing the pre- and posttest student narratives and was identified as one of orientation. Students' comments were interpreted as other-oriented if the tone of the response contained descriptions of aging based on observations of companions. More self-oriented writings included mentions of fears or concerns students expressed for themselves as they aged. The majority of the posttest narratives (82.4%) described aging in responses that were other-oriented while the majority (60%) of these students' pretest narratives were self-oriented.

TABLE 1. Aging-Related Terms Referred to in Both Pre- and Posttest Narratives

References Common to Pre- and Posttest Narratives	Context in Narrative (Working Definition)
fear of decline	an association between aging and decline in function
state of mind	description of aging as a
respect	description of older adults as deserving respect
wisdom	description of older adults as having and dispensing wisdom
happy	an association between aging and a time of happiness
day-to-day difficulties	an acknowledgment that aging in a nursing home is associated with difficulties in daily tasks
needing support	an association between aging and the need for support from others
life to fullest	a description of older adults as not being limited but being capable of similar expectations as in their younger years
uniqueness	a description of older adults as a group that shouldn't be stereotyped based on age but as a group consisting of individuals each different from the other
teach others	an association between aging and having something valuable to teach others, especially younger individuals
active	an association between aging and an active lifestyle
poor treatment by society	a description of older adults as unfairly receiving poor treatment by others indicating lack of respect for older adult residents by younger members of society
loss of self-worth	a description of older adults as portraying declining appreciation for their own worth to others
loss of independence	an association between aging and growing dependence on others for tasks in which the older adult was previously independent
loss of love, communication, and companionship*	an association between aging in a nursing home and the loss of opportunity for love, communication, and companionship due to isolation from family and friends
loss of cognition	a description of older adults as being functionally impaired due to failing cognition
loss of health	an association between aging and decline in health as characterized by greater frequency of illness

\*These appear in the results as separate terms due to references by different percentages of students

TABLE 2. Disability-Related Terms Referred to in Both Pre- and Posttest Narratives

References Common to Pre- and Posttest Narratives	Context in Narrative (Working Definition)
level of comfort	students' self-characterizations as being more at ease in the presence of individuals with disabilities
independence	an association between disability and the importance of maintaining independence in activities of daily living
need for support	an association between having a disability and the need for support from others
role projection	students imagining themselves with a disability similar to that of their companion and evaluating their own coping in comparison to their companion's
poor treatment	a description of individuals with disabilities as unfairly receiving poor treatment by others indicating lack of respect based solely on one's having a disability
admiration	a description of individuals with disabilities as deserving admiration and respect for the manner in which they conduct their daily lives in light of the added difficulty of having a disability
day-to-day difficulties	an acknowledgment that having a disability is associated with difficulties in daily tasks

For example, a student posttest contained the following statement, "Aging is something that can be a very enjoyable and dignified experience. I think it depends on resources, good health, and family support mainly."

The more self-oriented writing characteristic of the minority of posttests but the majority of pretests is exemplified by the following statement:

I have a positive outlook on the elderly and actually growing old myself. That is as long as I have a good support system. I do not have a positive outlook on growing old alone, for example living in a nursing home without any family or friends to come see me.

The students in service learning with nursing home residents initially viewed elders differently comparing their pretest and posttest narratives. Generally, fewer qualities and issues were identified. With the exception of the reference to older adults "having much to share with (or teach) others," the pretest narratives reflected lower percentages of students mentioning each quality or issue. (Figure 1 contains the full list of refer-



ences and the frequencies of appearance. Figure 2 lists numerous SL-OA references to aging and loss.)

One reference appeared in the pretests that was not present in the posttests, namely, "fear of decline." Furthermore, the pretest narratives made no mention of a number of qualities and issues identified in the posttest including loss of self-worth, day-to-day difficulties, need for support, and poor treatment by society.

FIGURE 1. Service Learning with Older Adults: References Before (OA Pre) and After (OA Post) Service Learning

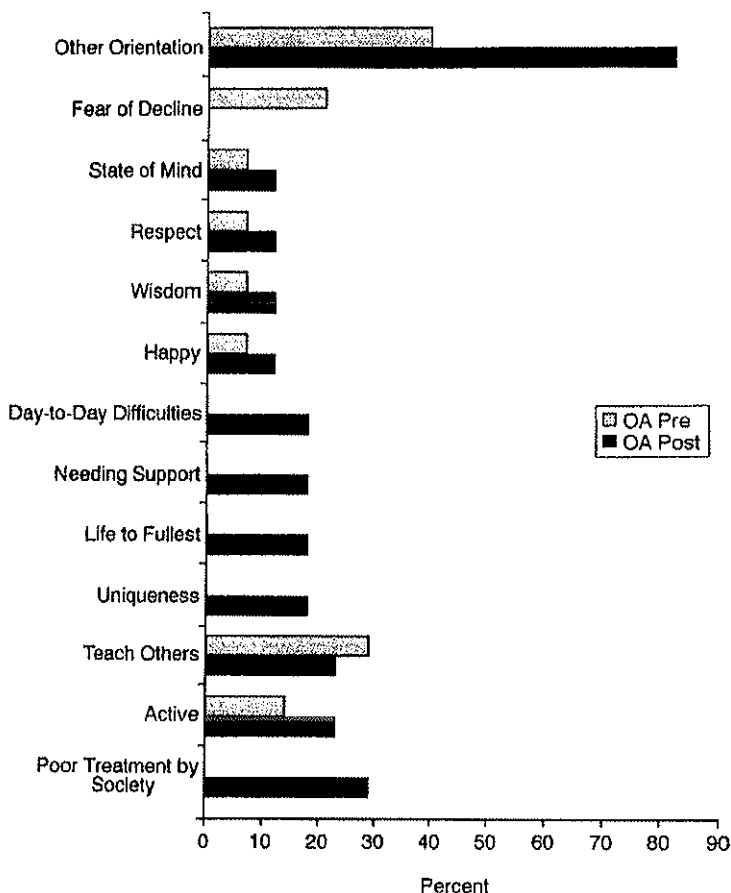
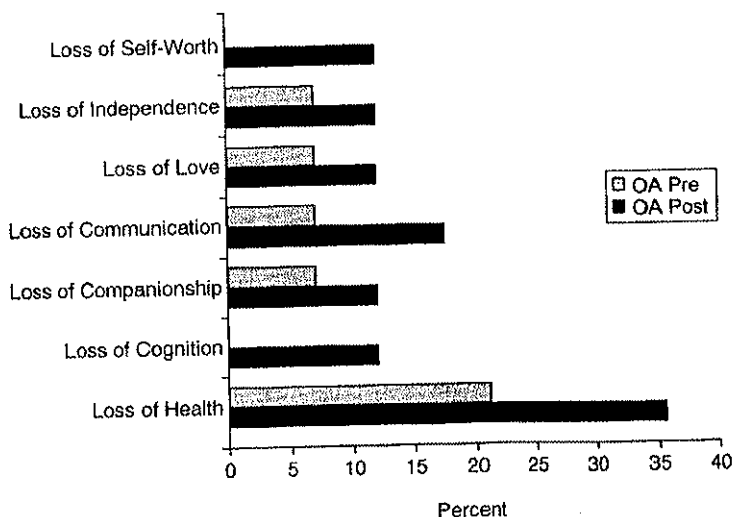


FIGURE 2. Service Learning with Older Adults: References to "Loss" Before (OA Pre) and After (OA Post) Service Learning

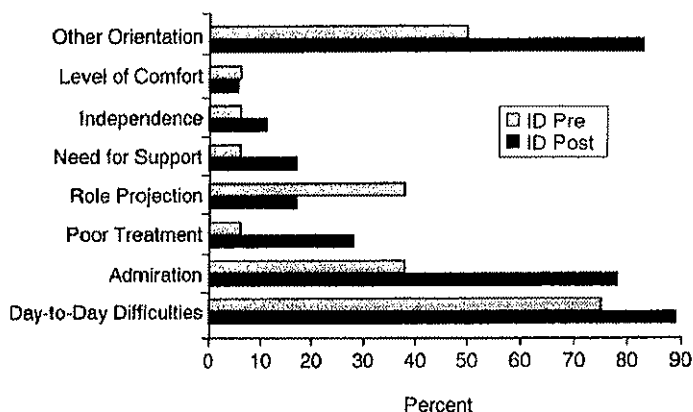


### *Student Perspectives on Disability Before and After Service Learning with Individuals with Disabilities*

In terms of general orientation, the posttest narratives of students visiting individuals with disabilities articulated a perspective on having a disability that was mostly other-oriented (83.3%). A representative response is, "Having a disability is extremely frustrating and difficult. [These individuals] face many challenges such as prejudices and barriers. Disabled people need strength and determination to survive and thrive." Students' orientation before the experience was split between self and other-orientation.

Turning to specific references, pre- and posttest narratives contained a number of common references but differed in frequency of mention. The largest differences in which pretest percentages were lower involved the recognition of poor treatment of individuals with disabilities by society, importance of support, admiration/respect, appreciation of day-to-day difficulties, and mention of the importance of independence (Figure 3). In contrast, a greater percentage of pretest narratives described imagining oneself in the role of having a disability. In every case, students' projected images were negative personal experiences. The following comment is

FIGURE 3. Service Learning with Individuals with Disabilities: References Before (ID Pre) and After (ID Post) Service Learning



representative of the more negative pretest references: "Were I to become disabled I think I'd feel shame and embarrassment. I'd be angry and resentful. I'd probably withdraw, feeling my old friends didn't really want to be bothered with me." In contrast, a more positively oriented posttest reference is: "I wasn't sure before that if I had a disability I could handle it. Now I know that people with disabilities are just normal people—a big help in realizing I could probably handle it."

## DISCUSSION

Comparing the pretest writings to the posttest narratives of the two groups, service learning students' perspectives changed during the course of the intervention in both settings. Students' posttest responses reflected thoughts that apparently were impacted by their experiences, and these thoughts differed from preexisting reasoning about aging and disabilities.

### *Student Perspectives on Aging*

Overall, the responses to the early assignment were brief and more general than posttest responses. In the case of the students visiting nursing home residents, the most striking effect of the experience was orientation. Students' responses changed such that almost all students demonstrated an

outside or other orientation in the end while less than half of the narratives were other-oriented in the beginning. As a consequence of real experiences, less conjecture was necessary concerning how aging might one day affect students personally (self-oriented reasoning) because students' energy was focused on real aging associated changes in someone other than themselves. It is unknown whether the greatest impact was from the environment or the older adult resident. But this was a context-rich experience, and it afforded the students a chance to enter into others' life space. The students got a closer view and could see, feel, and smell daily difficulties and individual ways of dealing with them. In the words of Peloquin (1995), "... one who would also be empathic must retain the capacity to apprehend, imagine, and feel" (p. 25). As a consequence of the service learning experience, the students seemed to have a richer stimulus and greater opportunity to develop this capacity.

Another notable change in students was their mention of seven issues in the posttest that were not referenced in the pretest writings. The experience possibly sharpened students' views of older adults' uniqueness, daily difficulties, and the importance of support as well as the potential impact on one's self-worth. These before and after differences help to contrast classroom-confined education and service learning. The students were regularly confronted with a concrete picture of the realities of aging in an institutional environment.

In contrast to references made only in the posttests, the only reference in the pretests not mentioned later was the more negative "fear of decline." This and the greater number of references to elders having much to teach others may be considered representative of students' earlier, more stereotypical thinking. Others have shown heightened student awareness following service learning leading to changes in students' long-standing stereotypes of older adults (Greene & Diehn, 1995; McGowan & Blankenship, 1994). Indeed, posttest views of aging demonstrated a different perspective, possibly recognizing constraints imposed by the social and physical environments. These writings reflected delight at the apparent discrepancy between their previously learned images of aging and the view that developed as they visited their companions. Bringle and Kremer (1993) demonstrated that students involved in service learning visiting older adults in nursing homes, exhibited a more positive view of their own aging compared to a non-visiting comparison group. A heightened desire to work with older adults subsequent to service learning also has been reported (Boren, Johnson, & Pawlson, 1982). These findings are consistent with those of Batchelder and Root (1994) who identified in college

students various gains following service learning including increases in awareness of multidimensionality and prosocial reasoning.

Arguably, students may have changed perspectives as a consequence of time and classroom experiences. However, those aspects of aging clearly identified in the posttest narratives appeared to be directly related to their experiences. Student perceptions of loss of self-worth and more frequent mention of loss of health and opportunities for communication were consistent with the realities of the nursing home environment. One of the main focuses of a nursing home is medical management of the residents, so there are certain constraints imposed on freedom as well as opportunities for pursuing interests through activity (Getman, 1995). The students were aware of these constraints and seemed to respond by writing about their impressions of the impact this may have on self-worth. Similarly, the students were regularly confronted with situations in which they were the sole visitors of their companions, obviating the lessened opportunities for love and communication.

Students' awareness of the loss of cognition also seemed to derive specifically from being present in the nursing home environment. Posttest narratives mentioning this loss consistently mentioned interruptions by other residents. The situation allowed students to contrast their companions with other residents, inducing the loss of cognition occurs in aging but not in everyone.

### *Student Perspectives on Disability*

Students visiting community-residing individuals with disabilities demonstrated pre- and posttest responses differing in orientation with the posttest narratives reflecting greater other orientation (Figure 3). Considering specific references, the same issues were mentioned in both early and later writings; but posttest percentages were greater per item in most cases (Figure 3).

In one exception, a larger number of pretest narratives reflected students imagining themselves in the role of having a disability (role projection). It may be that the actual daily experiences observed fostered less of a need to imagine. Also, the tone of the earlier responses was different. All of the pretest references to projected personal experiences were negative compared to the overall positive projections in the posttests. Pretest projections reflected sympathy, tragedy, shame, and anger. Posttests, in contrast, framed the projection in terms of a question, each student wondering whether he or she could "handle having a disability." In each case students hinted toward the affirmative based on the observed successful experiences of their companions.

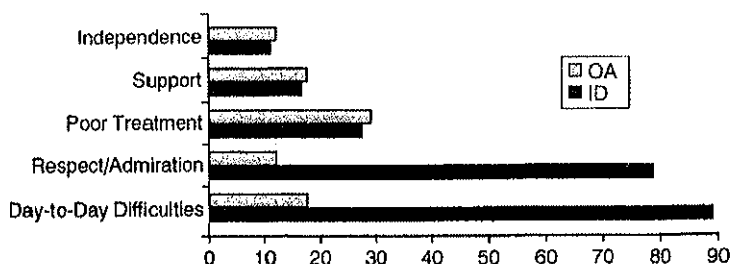
Another case of similarity in pre- versus posttest number with marked differences in content were the many pretest references concerning day-to-day difficulties. The earlier references to day-to-day difficulties were far more global, commenting more on the challenging nature of having a disability with almost no mention of actual day-to-day obstacles as was typical of the posttest narratives. This may have led to the greater number of student posttest narratives reflecting admiration or respect for their companions. Experiences seemed to sensitize students to day-to-day difficulties, providing opportunities to observe individuals in the context of environmental obstacles. In many cases students experienced these obstacles with their companions.

Being present with their companions in real community settings, service learning gave students the advantage of witnessing lessons first hand *with* their companions. Peloquin's (1995) insight applies: "[Empathy] implies an experience not only of the pain of another, but of the integrity and courage that dwell alongside the pain" (p. 26). These students experienced both the difficulty and the triumph through courage—courage to live in the community in the face of daily, sometimes nearly continuous obstacles. The impetus to develop empathy was present for these students, and similar findings have demonstrated a link between participation in community service and the development of empathy (Giles & Eyler, 1994).

### ***Comparison of the Two Service Learning Experiences***

Considering both service learning settings, students' narratives generally reflected an increased sensitivity and appreciation for the dignity of their companions. Two of the four references shared by the two service learning groups, independence and poor treatment by society, were mentioned in similar proportions (Figure 4). However, both respect and an awareness of day-to-day difficulties were mentioned far more in the posttest narratives of the students visiting community-dwelling individuals with disabilities. This differential effect is puzzling. Students visiting older adults in nursing homes may have found it more difficult to enter into life situations so different from their own considering both the age and the institutional setting of their older adult companions. Additionally, a fundamental responsibility of this setting is to manage individuals' care, including offering assistance so daily difficulties are minimized. Meanwhile students visiting individuals with disabilities were involved "closer to home" as experiences occurred in the same community as that in which the students lived. Additionally, the community-dwelling individuals were closer in age to the students.

FIGURE 4. Service Learning with Older Adults (OA) versus Individuals with Disabilities (ID)



An interesting if not troubling finding was the inability of either service learning experience to evoke written comments from students concerning advocacy for their companions especially in light of students' increased awareness of the tendency toward poor treatment of both groups. While nursing home residents' daily difficulties may be minimized by the setting, there are other issues for which change may be advocated. Regarding the community, access is legislated merely through barrier removal. The need for advocacy still exists since participation may be hampered by a number of factors, including social prejudice.

Service learning is intended to increase social responsibility. The growing awareness and sensitivity among the service learning students coupled with the *lack* of a growing sense of social responsibility (implied by *no* mention of advocacy) reiterates Boyte's (1991) point on service learning facilitating educational goal acquisition without impacting a tendency toward political action. Perhaps students' reference to the need for support indicated recognition of the importance of help from others and the need for advocacy. While both advocacy and support may be driven from an intense feeling for the individual, advocacy moves to change social policy as it imposes constraint from without; support is individually directed to address the particulars of a hardship encountered. Support may be less far reaching in its impact, but it reaches close to the individual in response to the expressed pain and disappointment. Support seeks to impact a more individualized but no less significant change. In her characterization of empathy, Peloquin (1995) stated, "Practitioners need fluency in the discourse about pain and courage, and that discourse requires the capacity to think and feel at once" (p. 25). The service learning students had weekly opportunities for such a discourse.

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Service learning in two different settings appeared to have an effect on students in which they became more aware of the life situations of their companions. Narratives written at the end of the experience, more so than those written after only one visit, seemed to reflect an appreciation among the students for dignity of their companions and a capacity for empathy. Both student groups exhibited a heightened awareness of their companions' day-to-day difficulties, although the experience involving individuals with disabilities living in community settings appeared to be more effective in this regard. This experience also resulted in a greater percentage of references by students demonstrating respect and admiration for their companions. In both experiences, references to the importance of independence and support as well as awareness of poor treatment of individuals by society increased following service learning. Awareness of these issues appeared to be equally impacted in the two experiences. As well, both experiences, as indicated by the change in the overall orientation of the responses, facilitated students' capacity to view individual situations from others' perspectives and not simply as an elaboration of their own life experiences.

Further research is indicated to replicate these findings using larger numbers of randomly selected student participants. Ideally, future designs would employ a control group receiving classroom instruction only without companion service learning experiences and students could be randomly assigned to either the control or service learning group. Additionally, both control and intervention groups should include in-class discussions as the effect of service learning has been shown to be strengthened in this way (Boss, 1994); and the development of advocacy and social responsibility appeared unaffected in both student groups in the present study. Finally, more work differentiating the benefits of various service learning settings would be worthwhile considering the factors identified in the present study indicating not all service learning experiences are equal in their effect.

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